

Why torture must not be sanctioned by the United States

It undermines our humanity and does not make society safer

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In the wake of September 11th, many people in the United States believe that torture is justifiable in the name of national security. A recent public opinion poll indicated that one in three Americans believe government-sanctioned torture of suspected terrorists is an acceptable means of gathering information.¹ As physicians, we have spent our professional lives documenting medical evidence of torture and caring for torture survivors. In the course of our work, we have encountered hundreds of individuals who have suffered unspeakable pain and degradation at the hands of government authorities throughout the world. Our experiences documenting the effects of these practices have clearly shown us that torture does not make any one person or society safer or more secure.

The notion that torture can be a rational act that serves a just purpose is a fiction that “rational” minds construct to conceal base human emotions. Examples of such constructions have surfaced in the media in the form of “ticking-bomb scenarios,” “torture warrants,” and the “lesser-of-two-evils” rationale.²⁻⁴ But when perpetrators of torture inflict extreme pain on their victims, they reduce their victims to a point that precludes obtaining reliable “information.” Victims then falsely confess to whatever their torturers want to hear.

Torture is “a form of savagery and stupidity.”^{5(p51)} The real aim of torture is the display of power, albeit a fictional one, through the medium of broken bodies and minds. By committing extreme acts of violence, torturers send a message of fear and intimidation to entire communities of perceived enemies. We agree with Hannah Arendt that violence does not necessarily require power or authority, but depends upon access to the implements or tools necessary to enforce one’s will.⁶

Those currently arguing in the abstract for torture only under “special circumstances” or with “humane limitations” know little of the horror they are prescribing. Such irresponsible fantasies are wholly inconsistent with the reality of the torturer’s deeds that have been indelibly imprinted on the bodies and minds of the hundreds of survivors we have come to know. We sincerely doubt that advocates of torture have ever touched the wounds of people like Mr S, a suspected terrorist whose legs were crushed by police in India, causing permanent deformity and to this day serving as a daily reminder of his abuse; or witnessed the intense shame and devastating social rejection experienced by Ms R, an Ethiopian student, who was raped in front of her father. We have. And whereas survivors of torture can and do rebuild their lives, the process of overcoming the torturer’s deeds is often a life-long challenge.

Torture cannot be applied like the edge of a surgeon’s blade, as some would have us think. It is a weapon of mass destruction that kills the very foundations of democracy, the rule of law, and—inevitably—our humanity. States that use torture undermine their own authority and legitimacy. In the case of the United States, any form of sanctioning torture would escalate its already widespread use and its attendant destabilizing effects. As public members of past US delegations to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, we have condemned the practice of torture on behalf of this country (Iacopino V. US statement on torture. Presented to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Review Conference, Istanbul, Turkey; November 9, 1999; Keller A. US statement on torture. Presented to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Review Conference, Warsaw, Poland; October 30, 1998). How sadly ironic it would be, now, for the United States to join the ranks of the countries it has long condemned for this practice.

Increasingly, health professionals have recognized the health consequences of human rights violations and have worked to protect and promote human rights.^{7,8} During the past 20 years, physicians have and continue to play a crucial role in the documentation of torture and treatment of survivors. However, in countries where torture and ill treatment are common, the coercion of health professionals to misrepresent, neglect, or falsify medical evidence of torture and ill treatment is often an important element of states’ denials of the existence of these abuses.⁹ As physi-



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cians, we cannot be silent witnesses to the practice of torture, and to physician participation in torture, anymore than we can turn a blind eye to calls for legally sanctioned torture in the United States.

Recent media attention on the possible use of torture may seem benign at this time, but this is hardly the case. To consider acts that the world has deemed unjustifiable under any circumstance should be profoundly disturbing to us all. We understand and support the imperative of human freedoms, including the freedom of speech. We understand and share the sense of unmitigated rage toward those who have brutally erased the lives of fellow human beings. But torture is not the answer. Torture will never serve the interests of justice because it undermines our worth and humanity. The rage that we now see masquerading as public discourse should be held in check. It should be transformed into words and deeds that are worthy of public interest and debate. We must move the debate forward in ways that dignify us all.

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